THE MATCH.....

By James Oliver Curwood

"Billy swayed dizzily. He laughed, even as he crumpled down in the snow."

SERGEANT BROKAW was hatchet faced, with shifting pale blue eyes that had a glint of cruelty in them. He was tall and thin, and lithe as a cat. He belonged to the Royal Northwest Mounted Police and was one of the best men on the trail that had ever gone into the North.

His business was man hunting. Ten years of seeking after human prey had given to him many of the characteristics of a fox. For six of those ten years he had represented law north of fifty-three. Now he had come to the end of his last hunt, close up to the Arctic Circle.

For 187 days he had been following a man. The hunt had begun in midsummer, and it was now midwinter. Billy Loring, who was wanted for murder, had been a hard man to find. But he was caught at last and Brokaw was keenly exultant. It was his greatest achievement. It would mean a great deal for him down at headquarters.

In the rough and dimly lighted cabin his man sat opposite him, on a bench, his manacled hands crossed over his knees. He was a younger man than Brokaw—30, or a little better. His hair was long, reddish and untrimmed. A stubble of reddish beard covered his face. His eyes, too, were blue—of the deep honest blue that one remembers and most frequently trusts.

He did not look like a criminal. There was something almost boyish in his face, his face a little hollowed by long privation. He was the sort of man that other men liked. Even Brokaw, who had a heart like flint in the face of crime, had melted a little.

"Lights be shivered. Listen to that beastly wind! It means three days of storm."

Outside a gale was blowing straight down from the Arctic. They could hear the steady moaning of it in the spruce tops over the cabin, and now and then there came one of those raging blasts that filled the night with strange shrieking sound. Volleys of fine, hard snow beat against the one window with a rattle like shot.

In the cabin it was comfortable. It was Billy's cabin. He had built it deep in a swamp, where there were lynx and fisher cat to trap, and where he had thought that no one could find him. The sheet iron stove was glowing hot. An oil lamp hung from the ceiling. Billy was sitting so that the glow of this fell in his face. It scintillated on the rings of steel about his wrists. Brokaw was a cautious man as well as a clever one, and he took no chances.

"I like storms—when you're inside, an' close to a stove," replied Billy. "Makes me feel sort of—safe." He smiled a little grimly. Even at that it was not an unpleasant smile.

Brokaw's snow-reddened eyes gazed at the other.

"There's something in that," he said. "This storm will give you at least three days more of life."

"Won't you drop that?" asked the prisoner, turning his face a little, so that it was shaded from the light. "You've got me now, an' I know what's coming as well as you do." His voice was low and quiet, with the faintest trace of a broken note in it, deep down in his throat. "We're alone, old man, and a long way from any one.

"I ain't blaming you for catching me. I haven't got anything against you. So let's drop this other thing—what I'm going down to—and talk something pleasant. I know I'm going to hang. That's the law. It'll be unpleasant enough when it comes, don't you think? Let's talk about—about—home. Got any kids?"

Brokaw shook his head, and took his pipe from his mouth.

"Never married," he said shortly.

"Never married," mused Billy, regarding him with a curious softening of his blue eyes. "You don't know what you've missed, Brokaw. Of course, it's none o' my business, but you've got a home—somewhere——"

Brokaw shook his head again.

"Been in the service ten years," he said. "I've got a mother living with my brother somewhere down in York State. I've sort of lost track of them. Haven't seen 'em in five years."

Billy was looking at him steadily. Slowly he rose to his feet, lifted his manacled hands and turned down the light.

"Hurts my eyes," he said, and he laughed frankly as he caught the suspicious glint in Brokaw's eyes. He seated himself again, and leaned over toward the other.

"I haven't talked to a white man for three months," he added, a little hesitatingly. "I've been hiding—close. I had a dog for a time, but he died, an' I didn't dare go hunting for another. I knew you fellows were pretty close after me. But I wanted to get enough fur to take me to South America. Had it all planned, an' she was going to join me there—with the kid. Understand? If you'd kept away another month——"

There was a husky break in his voice, and he coughed to clear it.

"You don't mind if I talk, do you—about her, an' the kid? I've got to do it, or bust, or go mad. I've got to because—to-day—she was 24—at 10 o'clock in the morning—an' it's our wedding day——"

The half gloom hid from Brokaw what was in the other's face. And then Billy laughed almost joyously.

"Say, but she's been a true little partner," he whispered proudly, as there came a lull in the storm. "She was just born for me an' everything seemed to happen on her birthday, an' that's why I can't be downhearted, even now. It's her birthday, you see, an' this morning, before you came, I was just that happy that I set a plate for her at the table, an' put her picture and a curl of her hair beside it—set the picture up so it was looking at me—an' we had breakfast together. See here——"

He moved to the table, with Brokaw watching him like a cat, and brought something back with him, wrapped in a soft piece of buckskin. He unfolded the buckskin tenderly and drew forth a long curl that rippled a dull red and gold in the lamplight, and then he handed a photograph to Brokaw.

"That's her!" he whispered.

Brokaw turned so that the light fell on the picture. A sweet, girlish face smiled at him from out of a wealth of flowing, dishevelled curls.

"She had it taken that way just for me," explained Billy, with the enthusiasm of a boy in his voice. "She's always wore her hair in curls—an' a braid—for me, when we're home. I love it that way. Guess I may be silly, but I'll tell you why. That was down in York State, too.

"She lived in a cottage, all grown over with honeysuckle an' morning glory, with green hills and valleys all about it—and the old apple orchard just behind. That day we were in the orchard, all red an' white with bloom, and she dared me to a race. I let her beat me, and when I came up she stood under one of the trees, her cheeks like the pink blossoms, and her hair all tumbled about her like an armful of gold, shaking the loose apple blossoms down on her head.

"I forgot everything then, and I didn't stop until I had her in my arms, an', an' she's been my little pardner ever since. After the baby came we moved up into Canada, where I had a good chance in a new mining town. An' then——"

A furious blast of the storm sent the overhanging spruce tops smashing against the top of the cabin. Straight overhead the wind shrieked almost like human voices, and the one window rattled as though it were shaken by human hands. The lamp had been burning lower and lower. It began to flicker now, the quick sputter of the wick lost in the noise of the gale. Then it went out.

Brokaw leaned over and opened the door of the big box stove and the red glow of the fire took the place of the lamplight. He leaned back and relighted his pipe, eying Billy. The sudden blast the going out of the light, the roaring of the stove door, had all happened in a minute, but the interval was long enough to bring a change into Billy's voice. It was cold and hard when he continued. He leaned over toward Brokaw and the boyishness had gone from his face.

"Of course, I can't expect you to have any sympathy for this other business, Brokaw," he went on. "Sympathy isn't in your line, an' you wouldn't be the big man you are in the service if you moaned and twisted overhead, and a volley of wind and snow shot suddenly down the chimney, forcing open the stove door, so that a shaft of ruddy light cut like a red knife through the dense gloom of the cabin.

In varying keys the sounds played a part in Billy's dreams. In all those dreams and segments of dreams the girl—his wife—was present, since they had gone for wild flowers and had been caught by the thunderstorm, and had run to an old and disused barn in the middle of a field for shelter. He was back in that barn again, with her—and he could feel her trembling against him, and was stroking her hair as the thunder crashed over them and the lightning filled her eyes with fear.

After that there came to him a vision of the early autumn nights when they had gone, even roasting, in other young people. He had always been afflicted with a slight nasal trouble and smoke irritated him. It set him sneezing and kept him dodging about the fire, and she had always laughed when the smoke persisted in following him about like a young scamp of a boy bent on tormenting him.

The smoke was unusually persistent to-night. He tossed in his bunk and buried his face in the blanket that answered for a pillow. The smoke reached him even there and he sneezed chokingly. In that instant the girl's face disappeared. He sneezed again—and awoke.

A startled gasp broke from his lips, and the handcuffs about his wrists clanked as he raised his hand to his face. In that moment his dazed senses adjusted themselves. The cabin was full of smoke. It partly blinded him, but through it he could see tongues of fire shooting toward the ceiling. He could hear the crackling of burning pitch, and he yelled wildly to Brokaw.

In an instant the sergeant was on his feet. He rushed to the table where he had placed a pail of water the evening before, and Billy heard the hissing of the water as it struck the flaming wall.

"Never mind that," he shouted. "The shack's built of pitch cedar. We've got to get out!"

Brokaw groped his way to him through the smoke and began fumbling at the chain about his ankles.

"I can't—find—the key—" he gasped chokingly. "Here—grab hold of me!"

He caught Billy under the arms and dragged him to the door. As he opened it the wind came in with a rush and behind them the whole cabin burst into a furnace of flame. Twenty yards from the cabin he dropped Billy in the snow, and ran back. In that seething room of smoke and fire was everything on which their lives depended, food, blankets even their coats and caps and snowshoes. But he could get no further than the door.

He returned to Billy, found the key in his pocket and freed him from the chain about his ankles. Billy stood up. As he looked at Brokaw the glass in the window broke and a sea of flame spurted through. It lighted up their faces.

The sergeant's face was set and hard. His prisoner's face was curiously white. He could not keep from shivering. There was a strange smile on Billy's face, and a strange look in his eyes. Neither of the two men had undressed for sleep, but their coats, and caps and heavy mittens were in the flames.

Billy rattled his handcuffs. Brokaw looked him squarely in the eyes.

"You ought to know this country," he said. "What'll we do?"

"The nearest post is sixty miles from here," said Billy.

"I know that," replied Brokaw. "And I know that Thoreau's cabin is only twenty miles from here. There must be some trapper or Indian shack nearer than that. Is there?"

In the red glow of the fire Billy smiled. His teeth gleamed at Brokaw. It was in a lull of the wind, and he were close to Brokaw, an' I spoke quietly, his eyes shining more and more with that strange light that had come into them.

"This is going to be a big sight easier than hangin' or going to jail for half my life, Brokaw—an' you don't think I'm going to be fool enough to miss the chance, do you? It ain't hard to die of cold. I've almost been there once or twice.

"I told you last night why I couldn't give up hope—that something good for me always came on her birthday, or

"As he opened the door the wind came in with a rush and behind them the whole cabin burst into a furnace of flame."

Brokaw was buttoning the thick collar of his shirt close up about his neck. On his face, too, there came for a moment a grim and determined smile.

"Come on," he said. "We'll make Thoreau's or die!"

"Sure," said Billy, stepping quickly to his side. "I suppose I might lie down in the snow, an' refuse to budge. I'd win my game then, wouldn't I? But we'll play it—on the square. It's Thoreau's, or die. And it's up to you to find Thoreau's."

He looked back over his shoulder at the burning cabin as they entered the edge of the forest, and in the gray darkness that was preceding dawn he smiled to himself. Two miles to the south, in a thick swamp, was Indian Joe's shack. They could have made it easily. On their way to Thoreau's they would pass within a mile of it. But Brokaw would never know. And they would never reach Thoreau's. Billy knew that.

He looked at the man hunter as he broke trail ahead of him—at the pugnacious hunch of his shoulders, his long stride, the determined clench of his hands, and wondered what the soul and the heart of a man like this must be, who to such an hour would not trade life for life. For almost three-quarters of an hour Brokaw did not utter a word. The storm had broke. Above the spruce tops the sky began to clear. Day came slowly. And it was growing steadily colder.

The swing of Brokaw's arms and shoulders kept the blood in them circulating, but Billy's manacled wrists held a part of his body almost rigid. He knew that his hands were already frozen. His arms were numb, and when at last Brokaw paused for a moment on the edge of a frozen stream Billy thrust out his hands and clanked the steel rings.

"It must be getting colder," he said. "Look at that."

The cold steel had seared his wrists like hot iron, and had pulled off patches of skin and flesh. Brokaw looked, and hunched his shoulders. His lips were blue. His cheeks, ears and nose were frostbitten. There was a curious thickness in his voice when he spoke.

"Thoreau lives on this creek," he said. "How much farther is it?"

"Fifteen or sixteen miles," replied Billy. "You'll last just about five, Brokaw. I won't last that long unless you take these things off and give me the use of my arms."

"To knock out my brains when I ain't looking," growled Brokaw. "I guess—before long—you'll be willing to tell where the Indian's shack is."

He kicked his way through a drift of snow to the smoother surface of the stream. There was a breath of wind in their faces and Billy bowed his head to it. In the hours of his greatest loneliness and despair Billy had kept up his fighting spirit by thinking of pleasant things, and now, as he followed in Brokaw's trail, he began to think of home.

It was not hard for him to bring up visions of the girl wife who would probably never know how he had died. He forgot Brokaw. He followed in the trail mechanically, falling to notice that his captor's pace was growing steadily slower, and that his own feet were dragging more and more like leaden weights.

He was back among the old hills again and the sun was shining, and he heard laughter and song. He saw Jeanne standing at the gate in front of the little white cottage, smiling at him and waving Baby Jane to him. The hand at him as he looked back over his shoulder from down the dusty road. His mind did not often travel as far as the mining camp, and he had completely forgotten it now. He no longer felt the sting and pain of the biting cold.

It was Brokaw who brought him back into the reality of things. The sergeant stumbled and fell in a drift, and Billy fell over him.

For a moment the two men lay half buried in the snow, looking at each other without speaking. Brokaw moved first. He rose to his feet with an effort. Billy made an attempt to follow him. After three efforts he gave it up and blinked up into Brokaw's face with a queer laugh. The hunch was almost soundless.

There had come a change in Brokaw's face. His determination and confidence were gone. At last the iron mask of the law was broken and there shone through it something of the emotions and the brotherhood of man. He was fumbling in one of his pockets, and drew out the key to the handcuffs. It was a small key and he held it between his stiffened fingers with difficulty. He knelt down beside Billy.

The keyhole was filled with snow. It took a long time—ten minutes before the key fitted in and the lock clicked. He helped to tear off the cuffs. Billy felt no sensation as bits of skin and flesh came with them. Brokaw gave him a hand and assisted him to rise. For the first time he spoke.

"Guess you've got me beat, Billy," he said. "Where's the Indian's?"

He drew his automatic Savage from its holster and tossed it in the crowbrlift. The shadow of a smile passed grimly over his face. Billy looked about him. They had stopped where the frozen path of a smaller stream joined the creek. He raised one of his stiffening arms and pointed to it.

"Follow that creek—four—miles—and you'll come to Indian Joe's shack," he said.

"And a mile is just about our limit."

"Just about—yours," replied Billy. "I can't make another halt. If we had a fire——"

"If—" wheezed Brokaw.

"If we had a fire," continued Billy, "we could warm ourselves an' make the Indian's shack easy, couldn't we?"

Brokaw did not answer. He had turned toward the creek when one of Billy's pulseless hands fell heavily on his arm.

"Look here, Brokaw."

Brokaw turned. They looked into each other's eyes.

"I guess mebby you're a man," Brokaw," said Billy quietly, "You've done what you thought was your duty. You've kept your word to th' law, an' I believe you'll keep your word with me. If I say the word that'll save us now will you go back to headquarters an' report me dead?"

For a full half minute their eyes did not waver. Then Brokaw said:

"No."

Billy dropped his hand. It was Brokaw's hand that felt on his arm now.

"I can't do that," he said. "In ten years t ain't run out the white flag once. It's something that ain't known in the service. There ain't a coward in it, or a man who's afraid to die. But I'll play you square. I'll wait until we're both on our feet again, and then I'll give you twenty-four hours the start of me."

Billy was smiling now. His hand reached out. Brokaw's met it, and the fingers scarcely felt.

"Do you know," said Billy softly, "there's been somethin' runnin' in my head ever since we left the burning cabin, and it's something my mother taught me: 'Do unto others as you'd have others do unto you.' I'm a d—— fool, ain't I? But I'm goin' to try the experiment, Brokaw, an' see what comes of it. I could drop in a snowdrift an' let you go on—to die. Then I could save myself. But I'm going to take your word—an' do the other thing. I've got a match."

"A match!"

"Just one. I remember dropping it in my pants pocket yesterday when I was out on the trail. It's in this pocket. Your hand is in better shape than mine. Get it."

Life had leaped into Brokaw's face. He thrust his hand into Billy's pocket, staring at him as he fumbled, as if fearing that he had lied. When he drew his hand out the match was between his fingers.

"Ah!" he whispered excitedly.

"Don't get nervous," warned Billy. "It's the only one."

Brokaw's eyes were searching the low timber along the shore.

"There's a birch tree," he cried. "Hold it—while I gather a pile of bark!"

He gave the match to Billy and staggered through the snow to the bank. Strip after strip of the loose bark he tore from the tree. Then he gathered it in a heap in the shelter of a low-hanging spruce and added dry sticks and still more bark to it. When it was ready he stood with his hands in his pockets and looked at Billy.

"If we had a——one an' a piece of paper——" he began.

Billy thrust a hand that felt like lifeless lead inside his shirt and fumbled in a pocket he had made there. Brokaw watched him with red, eager eyes. The hand reappeared and in it was the buckskin wrapped photograph he had seen the night before. Billy took off the buckskin. About the picture there was a lock of tissue paper. He gave this and the match to Brokaw.

"There's a little gun-file in the pocket the match came from," he said. "I had it mending a trap chain. You can watch me, Brokaw, an' see that——"

He turned so that Brokaw could reach into the pocket, and the man hunter thrust in his hand. When he brought it forth he held the file. There in his hand was Billy's frost-bitten face as he held the picture for a moment under Brokaw's eyes. Billy's own hands had ruffled up the girl's shining curls an instant before the picture was taken, and she was laughing at him when the camera clicked.

"It's all up to her, Brokaw," Billy said gently. "I told you that last night. It was she who woke me up before the fire got me. If you ever prayed pray a little now. For she's going to strike that match!"

He still looked at the picture as Brokaw knelt beside the pile he had made, and he heard the scratch of the match on the file, but his eyes did not turn. The living, breathing face of the most beautiful thing in the world was speaking to him from out of that picture. His mind was dazed. He swayed a little. He heard a voice low and sweet, and so come to a stop, planning a long journey in a nervous from As far as the sound was many of the signal would the trains as well as the

A joyous cry surged up from but it died on his lips in a strange A louder cry brought him back to himself for a moment. It was from Brokaw. The sergeant's face was terrible to behold. He rose to his feet, swaying, his hands clutched at his breast. His voice was thick—hopeless.

"The match—went—out——"

He staggered up to Billy. His eyes like a madman's. Billy swayed dizzily. He laughed, even as he crumpled down in the snow. As if in a dream he saw Brokaw stagger off on the frozen trail. He saw him disappear in his hopeless effort to reach the Indian's shack.

And then a strange darkness fell upon him, and in that darkness he heard still the sweet voice of his wife. It spoke his name again and again, and it urged him to wake up—wake up—wake up! It seemed a long time before he could respond to it. But at last he opened his eyes. He dragged himself to his knees, and looked first to the girl Brokaw. But the man hunter had gone—forever.

The picture was still in his hand. Less distinctly than before he saw the girl smiling at him. And then—at his back—he heard a strange and new sound. With an effort he turned to discover what it was.

The match had hidden an unseen spark from Brokaw's eyes. From out of the pile of fuel was rising a pillar of smoke and flame.

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Subway Signals

ARE you a subway signal watcher? Perhaps you are, without being aware of it. Just think a moment.

Don't you recollect having watched the signals in the subway some morning when you were in a hurry to get downtown? You wanted to see if the track was clear for the express train that was about to enter the station. Perhaps you recollect that the signal a few feet south of the express platform and station, on the southbound side, showed red and orange lights which warned the motorman of the train that he must not proceed, as the track ahead was occupied by another train.

You realized that even if the motorman of your train wanted to speed he could not do so, for the train ahead in the roadbed opposite the platform would immediately see the signal and make the train come to a standstill. Don't you remember what a disheartening effect the red and orange signal lights had upon you?

If it were any other morning than this you wouldn't have minded them on almost every occasion you were short of time on your disposal, but this morning, the very morning when you were anxious to get downtown early, the red and orange lights.

You were in a quandary when you heard that express and realized the agony of a tedious trip down to cross to the other side of the platform and take a local train instead, that the local would not be obliged to delay and would get you downtown quicker than the train on the express track, although the trip on the local would be more tiresome because of the numerous stops. Didn't you hesitate a little to board the express on account of your chances?

What did you do when you saw the first car? Why, you made your way up to the front platform, although that platform was crowded with signal watchers who were there before you arrived, you managed to get there and craning your neck to get a glimpse of the signal as the train rode downtown. Do you remember how you braced up when you saw the red flash an orange and a green, thereby noting that the express could go another block ahead? And don't you almost prayed that the next signal would show two green lights, thereby noting clear track ahead!

There are very few persons who ride in the subway that do not watch the signals. The next time you ride in an express see how many persons on the ground floor, particularly in the morning, watch the men and women as they enter, and you will see that nearly all of them keep their eyes on the signals. The signals are a barometer which indicates in a certain way in slow or fast time in the morning.

From constant watching these persons become as familiar with the meaning of the signals as the motormen themselves. They know that when the red displays two green lights the track is clear and the train will be allowed to proceed full speed while the yellow and green remain in that state. They know that when the red and orange lights appear the train will be slowed down to a speed, but the motorman will not stop as the following signal is also red and orange he'll know that the express will come to a stop, planning a long journey in a nervous from As far as the sound was many of the signal would the trains as well as the